

Is the Orange Revolution Over or Did It Never Happen?

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February 9, 2010

Viktor Yanukovich's victory in the Ukrainian presidential election Sunday has predictably sparked [a spate of commentary](#) that Ukraine's [Orange Revolution has come to an end](#). This conclusion seems natural given that it was the same Yanukovich's efforts to steal the 2004 presidential election that led to the Orange Revolution. At first glance, it is difficult to imagine a more clear symbolic rebuke to the western oriented reform agenda of President Viktor Yushchenko, who defeated Yanukovich in 2004, but received only 5% of the vote in the first round of this election, and to Yulia Timoschenko, the other major leader of the Orange Revolution, who lost to Yanukovich on Sunday, than Yanukovich's victory.

This, at least, is how the election has been portrayed in most media. A narrative has been created that the elections of 2004 and 2010 represented swings in the Ukrainian electorate signaling the beginning and end of the Orange Revolution. An alternative narrative has also emerged claiming that Yanukovich's victory is evidence of the [success of the Orange Revolution](#). Alternation of power through fair elections, as Ukraine has just experienced, is, after all, a defining characteristic of a democracy.

However, there is a considerably more plausible, if less dramatic, explanation of the events of the last decade or so in Ukraine. Perhaps Yushchenko's narrow victory in 2004 and Yanukovich's similarly narrow victory this year are part, not of a cycle of revolution and counter-revolution, or of a consolidation of democracy, but simply stages of Ukraine's slow and bumpy post-Soviet history. In this view, Yushchenko's victory in 2004 reflects a process of regime development of which Leonid Kuchma's presidency, which began in 1994, is also part.

In other words, maybe the Orange Revolution never really happened at all. Obviously, the events on Kiev's Maidan in late 2004 happened, leading to Yushchenko's becoming president, but it is possible that in the excitement of the moment, too much was read into these events. The victory in December of 2004 by a former prime minister under Leonid Kuchma over Kuchma's sitting prime minister may simply not have been the pivotal and revolutionary moment which it looked like at the time. Rather, it may have been another stage in Ukraine's continuous path from Soviet republic to something else.

Taken as a whole the transition from Kuchma to Yushchenko to Yanukovich, represents as much continuity as change. More accurately, neither the events of January 2004, as dramatic and symbolically laden as they were, nor the governance of Yushchenko were lasting turning points for Ukraine which demarcate a clear break with the past. There were, of course, differences in the coalitions which elected these three presidents as well as the goals, policies and governance of Kuchma and Yushchenko. Yanukovich will also differ in this respect from his predecessor, but these differences occurred within a regime

which, while far from entirely static, has remained somewhat consistent throughout these years.

Ukraine, while having become more free and democratic since 2004 remains a semi-democratic country where corruption is widespread, rule of law is erratic and government power is abused. Nonetheless, since the Orange Revolution, the freedoms of assembly, speech and media have become stronger and perhaps even entrenched. Yanukovich will have a hard time reversing this, or dramatically shifting Ukraine's development or foreign policy strategies. Like his predecessor, Yanukovich will be bound by a divided electorate and parliament. In this regard, it is wrong to say the Orange Revolution was a success or failure, but clearly its impact and transformative power were overstated from the beginning.

The events of the last few months in Ukraine confirm that the defining characteristic of all the Color Revolutions, Rose in Georgia, Orange in Ukraine and Tulip in Kyrgyzstan, was that they were neither colors nor revolutions. Roses and Tulips are flowers and Orange is a fruit, but all three are plants of some kind. More seriously, none of these were revolutions, as Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, in addition to not having made substantial strides towards democracy in recent years, are, like Ukraine, defined as much by their similarities to the previous regime as by their differences. All three of these events were another iteration of a longer process, but the phrase "Plant Iteration", while more accurate, does not have the same ring as Color Revolution.